

**Testimony of Gina McCarthy, Commissioner
Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection
Before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Resources-Subcommittee on Fisheries and Oceans
University of Connecticut-Avery Point Campus, Groton, CT
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I. Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Gilchrest, Representative Palone, Representative Simmons and members of the Subcommittee. I am Gina McCarthy, Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection. Thank you for this opportunity to express our strong support for the Long Island Sound Stewardship Act of 2005 and welcome to the State of Connecticut. Connecticut is committed to working with our partners in the private sector and all levels of government to improve the stewardship of those special resource areas that best exemplify Long Island Sound. I hope that you have the opportunity to visit some of these areas during your visit, a glimpse of which is provided from this beautiful campus at Avery Point.

As you know, the Sound is a natural resource of national significance providing ecological and recreational benefits beyond Connecticut and New York's borders as recognized by its inclusion in the National Estuary Program. The Sound is an extraordinary scenic and recreational resource in the most densely populated region of the United States with over 21 million people living within 50 miles of its shores -- nearly 10% of the U.S. population. The Sound's estimated economic value to the region is over \$5 billion dollars annually while providing a home to a wide variety of migratory finfish and birds and spawning habitat to over 50 species of finfish.

The challenges of managing this estuary of national importance in the 21st Century extend beyond the traditional water quality focus of Long Island Sound Study efforts. We need to evaluate how we can improve management of intertidal lands and those terrestrial landscapes that provide a critical link to the Sound, while respecting the rights of individual landowners. This type of comprehensive approach to managing our coastal

and estuarine resources corresponds precisely with the recommendations of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy. The Commission found that development pressures in coastal areas are significantly diminishing the value of our nation's coastal resources as well as public access to and enjoyment of these areas and that such threats are best addressed at the watershed or landscape scale. The Long Island Sound Stewardship Initiative provides just the type of comprehensive and integrated resource management model envisioned by the Ocean Commission.

By passing the Long Island Sound Stewardship Act of 2005, Congress would build on an existing effective partnership established through the EPA's Long Island Sound Study, to identify, protect and enhance sites that best exemplify the values of this nationally important estuary. This partnership, including representatives from all levels of government, private non-profit conservation groups and other members of the private sector, is the type of collaborative effort that has worked so well over the past 20 years to manage the Sound's waters. Today, that partnership must be extended to protect the Sound's most significant ecological and recreational areas in the 21st Century.

II. Demonstration of Need for Long Island Sound Stewardship Act

The Act recognizes that the commitment of additional resources is necessary to better manage, protect and restore the Sound's most significant ecological and coastal recreation sites, many of which are threatened by forces both within and outside their boundaries. For example, Barn Island Wildlife Management Area, the State's single largest coastal conservation and recreation area and one of Connecticut's proposed flagship Stewardship sites, regularly faces such challenges. Recently, a parcel within the Barn Island marsh-coastal forest ecological complex was permitted for a golf course development that could have irreparably altered this area's sensitive tidal marshes, estuarine waters and coastal forest that support a variety of state and federally-listed species. Fortunately, through a cooperative agreement with the landowner, the site was preserved through the State's acquisition of the property, principally through funds provided by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. We hope this type of cooperative success

story can be replicated throughout the Sound through funding authorized by the LIS Stewardship Act.

Unfortunately, this Barn Island conservation success story is an exception rather than a rule when we have tried to conserve Connecticut's most significant privately held coastal areas through acquisition. Typically, the lack of sufficient acquisition resources that are readily available on short notice preclude the conservation of these areas. Once developed, conservation opportunities for remaining parcels may be lost forever.

Each year, the potential pool of significant coastal acquisition opportunities dwindles and we expect this trend to continue or accelerate. A recent analysis of Connecticut's larger remaining unprotected parcels with significant coastal conservation value indicates that few significant coastal acquisition opportunities remain. In a study of approximately 28,000 tax parcels within a 105 square-mile study area along the Connecticut coastline, only 78 parcels greater than 25 acres with conservation value of potential *statewide* significance were identified. Only 25 such parcels greater than 50 acres are believed to exist within the study area. Further complicating this conservation acquisition planning strategy is the astronomical market value of coastal real estate. Once potential acquisition opportunities and willing sellers are identified, sale prices or competing bids for such property often preclude DEP's capacity to conserve undeveloped coastal lands.

Threats to Connecticut's most significant coastal areas also originate from within the boundaries of our existing public lands. Connecticut's coastal state parks and wildlife management areas are under tremendous pressure both to accommodate public recreational use and to provide essential fish and wildlife habitat.

For example, Connecticut's six coastal state parks account for approximately 40% of total visitors to our entire state park system. Campers at two shoreline parks comprise 67% of all campers within all state park campgrounds. These parks therefore are critical in meeting demand for outdoor recreational activities in Connecticut and provide the

most significant opportunity for the general public to experience the recreational opportunities provided by the Sound.

- a. However, recent infrastructure and capital improvement studies of Connecticut's coastal state parks indicate we are not consistently meeting basic visitor needs. These studies indicate there is a \$76 million backlog of maintenance and critical capital and infrastructure improvements needed at our coastal state parks to provide basic park services. To name a few, they include the upgrade of failing electric and water utility lines critical to public safety, improvements at boardwalks and fishing piers that provide 24/7 access, replacing and expanding deteriorating or under capacity visitor and nature centers, and enhancing campground capacity where we must routinely turn-away disappointed would be campers. Unfortunately, we do not have the resources to adequately address these needs. Consequently, public access to and enjoyment of Long Island Sound suffers.

We also need to better understand and respond to the management challenges at our coastal wildlife management areas and natural area preserves. Unfortunately, funding is not available for most land resource managers to respond to the threats faced by the properties they manage. As a result of years of eroding funding, only two site-specific management plans exist for Connecticut's 38 natural area preserves, wildlife management areas and coastal area state parks. Some of these properties accommodate multiple public uses such as boating, hunting, birding and fishing that occasionally result in resource and use conflicts. Similarly, development activities on private in-holdings and lands adjacent to or upstream of those properties pose significant threats to the recreational and habitat value of the protected sites. Additional funding for proactive management efforts is absolutely necessary for stewardship site managers to comprehensively address multiple use conflicts for specific sites rather than respond to individual crises on a case-by-case basis.

II. III. General public support for LIS Stewardship Initiative

Generally, the public supports cooperative management efforts such as those encouraged by the Long Island Sound Stewardship Initiative to protect the Sound's most significant resources areas and enhance those already under public ownership. Without the significant additional resources the Act would confer, we will not be able to provide or sustain a consistent level of resource protection and public access to the Sound that Connecticut's citizens have the right to expect.

While overall support for land acquisition and protection of sensitive resources is strong in Connecticut, the public also consistently demands that we manage DEP's most popular coastal properties and the public waters of Long Island Sound to accommodate a variety of uses. In this light, we are aware of some misunderstandings of how Stewardship designations in the Sound would affect traditional uses of these areas, such as boating and commercial or recreational fishing. To avoid such confusion and misunderstanding, we recommend that the bill be modified to clearly indicate that existing authorities for managing these areas are not affected by the Act and that it creates no new authorities restricting or limiting uses in managing water areas or subtidal lands in the Sound.

IV. Support for Re-authorization of LIS Restoration Act (within LISS Act)

As we turn our attention to the Long Island Sound Stewardship Initiative, it is critical that we continue existing federal partnerships that provide the resources and expertise needed to effectively administer the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Program (CCMP) developed through the Long Island Sound Study. We have committed, along with New York and EPA, to reduce nitrogen loads to Long Island Sound by 58.5% by 2014. To date, Connecticut has worked with 37 communities to upgrade wastewater treatment plants at a total cost of over \$500,000,000 of which \$150,000,000 was specifically for nitrogen removal costs. Through Congress' commitment of approximately \$9,800,000, through the Long Island Sound Restoration Act (LISRA), we have been able to commit significant financial support to 28 distressed communities to

assist them in planning and designing upgrades of their wastewater treatment plants for nitrogen removal. We estimate that completing nitrogen upgrades to improve water quality will take another \$500,000,000 in the state of Connecticut alone. We strongly support the reauthorization of the LISRA and are pleased that it is contained in this bill. We look forward to working together with all our partners to ensure that the various management needs of Long Island Sound are met to ensure that we can build on our past accomplishment to improve the Sound's water quality and its estuarine habitats.

V. Conclusion

Today, Connecticut stands at a critical crossroads in managing our coastal lands and resources. As we have learned from experience in addressing water quality and habitat restoration issues, an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure. We are here today with hope that the successful partnership established by the Long Island Sound Study can be expanded to create a comprehensive and coordinated Stewardship system for the improved protection and management of the coastal areas that best define Long Island Sound, Connecticut's most important natural resource. Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any of your questions.